

Manchu Mile tests resolve of young, old Warriors

By: Master Sgt. Donald Sparks
Public Affairs Chief, 2nd Infantry Division

I knew about the Manchu Mile long before I arrived to Korea. In a conversation with one of my coworkers, he showed off his belt buckle he earned for completing the 25-mile ruck march several years ago.

I had on my coveted 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment belt buckle, which put him near convulsions, "Hey sergeant, you're not authorized to wear that! This is the only belt buckle in the Army that is authorized for wear—you're violating."

I could still hear those words from Master Sgt. Michael Lavigne echoing in my head as I began the Manchu Mile on a frigid Korean morning at Camp Casey. Nearly eight hours later, I forever put those words to rest as I completed the Manchu Mile and became a part of a unit legacy that I will never forget.

Before the event even began, Lt. Col. Milford Beagle, 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment commander, huddled all of the Manchus together and gave a motivational pep speech to inspire us for the journey ahead.

Beagle reminded us that this march commemorates the heroic efforts of the Soldiers of the 9th Infantry Regiment, who made an 85-mile march from Taku Bar for their assault on Tientsin in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion in China.

He told the story of Col. Emerson H. Liscum, who was mortally wounded while in possession of the regiment's colors when attacking Tientsin. While falling, Col. Liscum passed the colors to another Soldier and directed his regiment to "Keep up the fire!" on the seemingly impregnable walls.

"This morning, unlike those Manchus, you are not marching 85 miles; you are not going into battle and you do not have a determined enemy waiting for you," Beagle said.

In a twist of irony, I was teamed up with the Soldiers of Delta "Demon" Company, 2-9, a bunch of tankers, who like me, dreaded walking the 25 miles. Having been assigned to a cavalry unit, I knew very well the tankers' motto of "death before dismount."

One mile into the march I was feeling pretty good – then the hill. I don't know if this monstrous geographical terrain feature had any nicknames, but this hill would challenge my 40-year-old legs, heart, lungs and spirit.

As I huffed and puffed loudly step by step, I began to get looks of concern from the Soldiers as they passed me by. Several of these young Warriors, who have not nearly walked as many miles I've marched in combat boots in my 20 years, would ask, "Are you good, master sergeant?"

Part of me was offended because I was still making my way up that hill, and part of me wondered if I look so pitiful to these young Warriors' eyes.

"Hell yeah, I'm good," I sniped back. In my mind I told myself, "This hill is kicking my fourth point of contact." Mile 4 was a lot more manageable as the terrain changed to dirt and rocks. As I noticed the sun shining its rays on the beautiful Korean landscape, I couldn't help but think, "This is God's country."

I asked myself again, "Why in the hell am I doing this?" I figure if I'm going to wear the 'Big Black Patch' on my left shoulder, I might as well take in all of the legacy and tradition of being assigned to the Warrior division.

I marched with Pvt. Steven Planck who, like me, had fallen back of the pack, but we could still see the guidon, which prompted me to motivate the 18-year-old trooper. As we picked up the pace I looked at Planck and said, "Watch your step."

The next thing I knew, I was airborne without a chute and making a crash landing face first. Trying to brace my fall, I managed to not break any bones, but my camera lens filter cracked and the flash shoe was damaged completely. Only my pride was broken, but at least the camera is still operable.

I noticed Planck trying to conceal his laughter. Years from now when he talks about his first Manchu Mile experience, he'll tell the story of a master sergeant busting his butt – this wasn't my intention of leaving a legacy.

I overheard someone say that the course gets easier after Mile 6, but my calculations told me there is nothing easy about 19 more miles. I'm not too good at math, but I do know 19 is more than three times of six, so how is that easy?

Midway through the march we stopped at a rest break. Inspecting my feet I saw there were no blisters. Second Lt. David Owen, who was attending high school in Daegu during my first tour in Korea back in 1999 made sure that my feet were fine.

Again we march. I had conversations with Staff Sgt. Cortez Jackson from Des Moines, Iowa about how these young Soldiers can't keep up with him, Pfc. Michael Trotter, who shares the same hometown with LeBron James of Akron, Ohio, and Cpl. Park, Sung Won, who was completing this third Manchu Mile.

Again we marched. At Mile 18 snow flurries began falling upon us as part of a cruel joke by Mother Nature. Unfazed, we continued our march. Trotter told me that his grandfather used to tell him, "Pain isn't permanent." What felt like a bee sting on the bottom of my left big toe; told me otherwise.

Of all the clichés I've said aloud to motivate myself – the one that best comes to mind is, "It's a thin line between hardcore and stupidity, and I've crossed that line." So to keep myself going, I sang the Warrior March – the song still sounds like a broken record in my mind.

Mile 22, I started thinking about the belt buckle. This march is more than earning the right to wear the Manchu buckle; it is about the fortitude of those brave Soldiers who marched to battle. It is about the Soldiers today who live up to the Warrior Ethos forged by the legacy of the Manchus before them.

At Mile 25, I was weary and worn. Yet as I saw the faces of the tankers I've bonded with during this march; I felt a sense of enthusiasm. Planck, who watched me eat dirt at Mile 4, smiled uncontrollably as his name was called to receive his buckle from Beagle. So did Trotter and Jackson.

When "Combat Camera" was called before my name, I am forever honored to earn the right of being called a Manchu.